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ABSTRACT

Over several years, challenges have been made to traditional theories of career choice. One of these challenges has been to consider the contexts in which individuals live and how this can influence career choices. The purpose of this model is to create a framework to explain the influences on career choices over the lifespan. The term "career choices" as used in this model refers not only to initial occupational choice, but also to all those choices made previously and subsequently that influence occupation or job choice. The paper states that social, cultural, geographic, and hereditary contexts influence career choices. Individual characteristics play a role as do core beliefs. Specific factors that most immediately affect career choice are availability of information, expectations, barriers, interest, economic need, and achievement motivation. Some of the recommendations are: (1) the model can be applied to individuals of various cultures; (2) career counseling can use it as a checklist to identify individual experiences and beliefs that may influence career choices; (3) schools, families, and communities need to acknowledge and plan for their influence on the career decisions of young people; and (4) organizations need to acknowledge their influence on and responsibility towards employees. (JDM)

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UNDERSTANDING CAREER CHOICES IN CONTEXT

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Introduction

Over the past several years challenges have been made to traditional theories of career choice. One of these challenges has been a call to consider the contexts in which individuals live and their influences on career choices (Hackett & Lent, 1992; Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). The following explanatory model of career choices was developed from original research (Vermeulen & Minor, 1998), as well as an integration of earlier career theory (Brown, Brooks and Associates, 1996; Savickas & Walsh, 1996).

The purpose of this model is to create a framework to explain the influences on career choices over the lifespan. No attempt is made here to specify the processes, or the strength of different influences, by which these factors interact to influence choices.

The term "career choices" as used in this model refers not only to initial occupational choice, but also to all those choices made previously and subsequently that influence occupation or job

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choice.

Contexts

Social, cultural, geographic, and hereditary contexts influence career choices. Social contexts are those in which groups and individuals interact directly with the person. Social contexts include families of origin and procreation, nuclear and extended (including family socioeconomic status); school and school-related activities; community (including ethnic group) interaction; and interactions in organizations.

Cultural contexts include national political priorities, cultural expectations and movements, economic cycles, changing occupational technology, changing organizational structures, workplace support of family/relationships, labor force participation of specific groups, and bias, stereotyping and oppression.

Geographic contexts have to do with the individual's physical surroundings and include availability of natural resources and levels of pollution.

Hereditary contexts are those with physical bases. They include gender, race, physical attributes, and drives.

Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristics are relatively stable products of the interaction of the individual with the social, cultural, geographic, and hereditary contexts; except for developmental stage, which presumably changes over time. They include personality, intelligence, special talents and limitations, health, and developmental stage.

Core beliefs

Core beliefs are those beliefs held most strongly by individuals. They exert a strong influence over individual career choices. Core beliefs include beliefs about gender roles and family roles, self-efficacy expectations, work salience, and spiritual beliefs.

Specific Factors

Specific factors are those most immediately affecting career choices. They include the availability (or lack of availability) of information about self, occupations, and probable outcomes of occupational choices; expectations of self and others; perceived and actual barriers; a sense of empowerment, or lack of it; individual values; interest in the work and aspects of life related to the work; economic need; access to appropriate paid employment; conditions of

employment of a position being held or considered; and achievement motivation.

Propositions

1. Career choices are shaped through the constant interaction of social, cultural, geographic, and hereditary contexts over time. This process takes place through the influence of the contexts on individual characteristics and core beliefs and of all three on specific (immediate) factors influencing decisions.

2. Core beliefs about appropriate gender and family roles, spiritual beliefs, self-efficacy expectations, and work salience have a strong impact on career decisions, both directly and through specific factors that influence those choices.

3. The individual characteristics of personality, intelligence, health, special talents and limitations; and developmental stage are developed through continuing interaction of hereditary, social, cultural, and geographic contexts. They influence career choices both directly and through impact on core beliefs and specific factors.

4. Individuals regard their careers differently and exhibit different career-related behaviors at different times in their lives.

5. Specific factors that influence an individual's career choices are a result of the constant interaction of the contexts and the individual. They are also influenced by that individual's characteristics and core beliefs.

6. An individual's life is his or her career; individuals make choices about how to construct their careers, and individuals seek to integrate all aspects of life.

7. Individuals can be assisted in making career choices by helping them understand their core beliefs, individual characteristics, the characteristics of their own contexts, their current individual circumstances and by enabling them to view themselves as having the ability to make and implement their own career choices.

Implications

1. This model can be applied to individuals of various cultures. Particularly the social and cultural contexts are unique to the individual's situation. It can apply to people in different countries as well as people in the same country who belong to different cultural groups.

2. Career counselors working with adults, as well as those working with young adults seeking their first jobs, can use this model as a checklist to identify

individual experiences and beliefs that may influence their choices.

3. Schools, families, and communities, need to acknowledge and plan for their influence on the career decisions of their young people. They need to provide occupational information and related experiences, a supportive environment where students can develop a sense of self-efficacy, a wide variety of experiences that enable students to determine which they do not like, as well as which they like, and bias free environments to encourage self expression.

4. Organizations need to acknowledge their influence on and responsibility towards employees. They need to provide working environments that encourage personal growth, as well as the development of work-related skills. They need to minimize barriers, real or perceived, to development and advancement. Those perceived barriers could include differential treatment of those of a particular race, gender, ethnicity, or ability level.

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